

Annie May Christian (1866-1941)

Annie “May” Christian was born on November 28, 1866 to Matthew and Elizabeth Christian in Decatur, Illinois. Sometime around 1876, the family moved into a house at 509 E. Front Street, which was built by Christian’s grandfather, Ebenezer Mitchell. Family members continually lived in this house until 1955. As of 2019, the house was still standing.

Christian appears to have been an excellent student. She was educated in Bloomington public schools, and was **salutatorian** of her graduating class from Bloomington High School in 1883. At the graduation ceremony at Durley Hall in downtown Bloomington, Christian presented an **oration** entitled “Bricks and Brains.”

After graduation, Christian found music to be her calling and went on to be taught piano and voice by several talented musicians. She studied under Mrs. Lydia Sherman, who operated a music studio downtown Bloomington, as well as Mrs. Hunter and Professor Albert Beuter. Christian also took up voice lessons. Her first concert after high school was at the “Author’s Carnival” in 1883.

Christian continued giving public performances locally for the next two years, despite a collar bone injury she suffered in 1885 when the horse she was riding stumbled, fell, and threw her to the ground. By 1895, she was a member of a number of clubs, including the History Club, which she remained in her entire life. Throughout her time as a member of the History Club, Christian frequently hosted meetings at her home on Front Street, and also served as president of the club several times.

Christian was a **charter member** of Bloomington’s Women’s Club, as well as its first treasurer after the club was founded in 1897. The club aimed to “make it easier for the sentiments and convictions of the women to find expression,” as well as increase the political influence of Bloomington’s women.

Though Christian was an active member of most organizations she belonged to, it is clear that the **Amateur Musical Club** (AMC) was her true passion and became her life’s work. The AMC was one of the most significant cultural forces in Bloomington-Normal throughout its entire existence. Founded in 1893, the AMC put Bloomington-Normal on the musical map, and brought the best of the musical world to the community. At first, membership was limited to 175 women—though men could become associate members. As the club grew, it began booking famous musicians to perform in Bloomington as another way to introduce residents to a variety of musical experiences.

Christian joined the club as early as 1897 and became a very active member. She helped organize the club’s annual Charity Day concert in 1902. This annual concert donated all of its receipts to charity each year. She was elected vice president of the club in 1905, a position she held for the next five years and then became the president.

Christian continued to maintain a very busy schedule of social and civic activities in addition to her work with the AMC. As a way to illustrate her independence and decision to never marry, it appears that Christian created a short, illustrated scrapbook around 1903 (which is preserved in the McLean County of Museum of History’s archival collection). The scrapbook reads:

“I often meditate./I am keeping away wrinkles/My mirror still cheers me/Some women have men to work for them./I have to work for myself./The men do not seem to need the women to entertain them now./This is the way some men entertain their wives./I have had chances to marry./But he might have been cross/I can borrow the neighbor’s children./My mother still appreciates my society./I

never would be spoony/I was always too independent/Still unoccupied./I spend my evening alone/My constant companion.”

Despite its few words and short length, Christian makes a clear, **feminist** argument that neither she, nor any man she could have married, has lost anything by her decision not to marry, and that she in fact has had a happier, safer life as a result.

One of the most notable events of all the club’s history occurred during Christian’s first year as president—the homecoming concert of local opera singer Minnie Saltzman-Stevens in November 1910. A former member of the AMC, Saltzman-Stevens left Bloomington six years prior to study voice and perform in Europe. She performed in Bloomington to a sold out show.

When the United States finally entered World War I in 1917, the Amateur Music Club and the general community of Bloomington used music to support the war effort through community sings. Community sings were already a growing **phenomenon** across the United States before the war. The Amateur Musical Club’s support of this new form of entertainment helped the practice take root in Bloomington during the summer of 1916 as part of a concert in Miller Park. At that time, the practice was seen to be an excellent way to bring the community together in patriotic support of the war effort. Six hundred people attended the sings during the first week after war was declared. By the fifth week, 3,200 people were in attendance.

The AMC did much to contribute to the war effort. They purchased **war bonds** and **stamps**, made contributions to the Red Cross, and even donated money to assist an unknown French musical **prodigy** suffering as a result of the war.

After World War I ended, Christian continued her successful leadership of the AMC. In 1920, the club continued to **innovate** and grow its work, with the introduction of free Sunday concerts. The first performance in January was an immediate success, and continued to be one of the most popular programs the club sponsored.

Christian continued to **advocate** for new charitable causes for which the AMC could help raise money. In 1921 she wrote an article for *The Pantagraph* encouraging people to purchase tickets to a concert performed by the St. Louis Symphony Orchestra, of which part of the proceeds would go to begin a fund to purchase uniforms for the Bloomington High School band.

Sometime in January 1922, Christian and her mother Elizabeth became seriously ill. Christian improved, but her mom continued to suffer from the illness. Christian needed to take a **leave of absence** from her role of president of the AMC. In her parting speech after twelve years as president and eighteen years total as an officer of the club, Christian praised the work the club had done to create a musical culture in Bloomington, and looked forward to a more musical future, as new technologies like the radio brought music more places more quickly. Addressing the general membership of the club she said, “So many of you have been associates with me for so long that a good part of the journey of life has been together on this musical highway and I want to thank you all for the **cordial**, loyal support you have given me and the wonderful work you have done.” Christian remarked “that the work done with you in these past eighteen years has been one of the really worth while things of my life.”

In 1932, in recognition of the breadth and depth of work she had done for the community, Christian was nominated for the Community Service Award by an anonymous friend. Though, she did not win..

Annie May Christian died on April 14, 1941. *The Pantagraph* ran a tribute to Christian, stating that, “such a life of service for others in the interest of artistic culture **bequeaths** to the city and all Central Illinois a name and a memory which shall last long and with undimmed fragrance.” She was a force in the Bloomington community all seventy-four years of her life and,

by her own admission, “was always too independent” for her time.

Discussion Questions: The title of her high school graduation essay was, “Bricks and Brains.” What do you think the essay would have been about? How have new technologies changed how music is spread and appreciated today? What do you think would surprise May most about the music world today?